DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 113 FL 021 705

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TITLE Negotiation of Meaning in Second Language Acquisition.
PUB DATE 23 Oct 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Advocates for Language Learning (Kansas City, MO, October 1993).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; *Comprehension; Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; Interpersonal Communication; Language Skills; *Learning Processes; Neurological Organization; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages; Semantics; Sequential Approach; Skill Development; *Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

A basic principle of second language learning is the need to negotiate meaning in any language-learning situation. Once meaning is established, comprehension follows. Clusters of meaning result in schemata, which serve as the basis for sustained communication and ultimately, permanence of language learning. The comprehension approach to second language learning assumes that learning can only occur when meaning is involved, and that meaning must be negotiated in any teacher-student interaction. Its methodology focuses on the optimum ways for meaning to be conveyed and internalized, and takes advantage of (1) appropriate involvement of brain hemispheres, (2) organization of language around semantic fields, and (3) the correct order of language skill development (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture). The teacher's job is to find the balance between what the student already knows and what the instructional materials make explicit. These principles can be applied in classroom instruction in such techniques as action demonstrations, paper-and-pencil demonstrations, and limited-speech exercises, use of audiovisual aids, writing exercises, conversation-building, simple story production, and use of prepared texts, depending on the skill level of the learner. The same principles can be used to provide focus in teacher training and supervision. (MSE)

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Document #3
L-Talk

NEGOTIATION OF MEANING IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

ED 364 113

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THE ADVOCATES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING ANNUAL CONFERENCE

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

SESSION E-1, Saturday, October 23, 1993, 2:00 p.m.

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As a teacher, as an administrator, and as a learner of more than one language, I have oftentimes asked myself what the best way to learn a language is. And, I believe that we, all of us who are involved in language education, at one time or another ask ourselves the same question. We try different things. And, we try hard. Yet, many a time, we have to admit that we are not doing the job that we would like to do. Perhaps our students are learning, but maybe they are not learning at the rate that is possible for them. What is missing?

The purpose of this presentation is to review a *basic principle of second language acquisition*, and to offer some teaching and teacher-training applications of that principle. This basic principle can be established as the **need to negotiate meaning in any situation of language acquisition**. In other words, it is the need to "make sense" to the listener. The point is that too often we think that we are

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making sense --but we are just further confusing the student. For instance, we may take the idea of high input for endless unplanned talk in class to an audience of beginners for whom only a few words of what we say actually may make sense. Or, we may assign translations tasks by way of dictionary use to students who do not have enough background in the language to distinguish among the different synonyms in either the first or the second language, therefore ending up with renderings such as "this hole is three foot profound" by assimilation of Spanish synonyms, or "the book of the teacher" by paralleling the Spanish rendering of the possessive in some languages other than English.

In order to clarify our discussion, let us first review some ideas on second language acquisition:

Language acquisition can be thought of primarily as a function of *meaning* . It deals with the negotiation of meaning; with the transaction of meaning; with the understanding of meaning; with the assimilation and internalization of meaning; with the response in meaning.

Very closely associated with meaning is *comprehension* . Through the appropriate transaction of meaning, comprehension follows. Meaning and comprehension are much like the two sides of the same coin. We could, indeed say that appropriate second language teaching can, from this standpoint, be defined as the appropriate conveyance of meaning with the purpose of helping the leaner acquire the second language. Furthermore, even from our own experience we can say that if there is

comprehension, there will be interest in the meaning on the part of the learner, attention to it, and assimilation and internalization of that meaning.

With the formation of clusters of meaning, *schemata* --clusters of related concepts-- are created in the learner's brain. Schemata, in turn, serve as a basis for sustained communication and, eventually, for permanency in language acquisition.

Approach has been used to designate a particular belief on how language learning occurs, or, as a consequence, how language teaching should be done. Approaches can generate particular *methodologies* of language teaching. Therefore, methodologies can be considered as groups of pedagogical procedures or ways to teach a language that are in consonance with a specific approach. *Procedure*, in turn, can be defined as a specific way in which the transaction of meaning takes places with the purpose of teaching or acquiring a language.

Based on the previous thinking about language learning, several theoreticians and practitioners such as Harris Winitz, Paul Garcia, and Jim Reeds proposed a comprehensive set of principles under the general title of *Comprehension Approach.*

Comprehension , as an overall approach to second language acquisition, can be defined --for our purposes-- as that approach that believes that language acquisition can only take place when meaning is involved. Grammar and syntax will follow if the models of communication (the teacher or others) are appropriate. In practical terms, the Comprehension Approach requires that everything we do to teach/acquire a

language have a specific meaning and that that meaning be adroitly transacted between the instructor and the learner. The *basic teaching principle* of the Comprehension Approach --the need for a transaction of meaning in any teacher-student interaction in the process of language acquisition-- has become the one shared principle of every modern approach to second language teaching. Simple as it is, though, this principle is often overlooked in practice.

The methodology ensuing from the Comprehension Approach is one that deals with *meaning and the best ways in which meaning can be conveyed and internalized!* It helps us understand that whatever we do in teaching a second language, if it does not have a specific meaning or if that meaning is not transacted between the instructor and the learner it becomes, at the least, a waste of time. As it is, often it actually harms language acquisition by wasting the learner's resources, by diminishing his interest in the language, and/or by having him learn what --much of the time-- has to be UN-learned before actual acquisition takes place.

Recent thinking about Comprehension includes its relationship with *psycholinguistic phenomena* --i.e. the way in which our minds work when acquiring or using a language. Some of those phenomena that seem to be useful to our purposes can be summarized as follows:

01. Appropriate involvement of cerebral hemispheres

Our cerebral hemispheres process information differently. Traditional language teaching has been predicated on addressing almost exclusively the left hemisphere

--the one that deals mostly with logical thinking, speech, etc. Yet, much of language acquisition --at least in its initial stages-- seems to be primarily a function of the right hemisphere or, at least, of some combination of both hemispheres. Therefore, in the early stages of language acquisition and even when acquiring many new linguistic items in advanced stages, meaning is primarily conveyed through the right hemisphere, the one that deals with imagery, sensation, creativity.

02. Organization of language around Semantic Fields

One of the ways in which the formation of schemata can be best established is through the use of chunks of meaning that revolve around a focal point --i.e. *Semantic Fields* . For our purposes, Semantic Fields can be defined as groups of words or expressions that have a very close relationship in meaning. For instance, in the semantic field of the word "down" are expressions such as "up and down", "Come on down!", etc.

03. Respect for the correct order of Language Skills

The order in which the *language skills* --listening/understanding, speaking, reading, writing, plus culture appropriateness-- are addressed is important in language acquisition. Violating this principle leads to confusion and waste of time. This order applies to language acquisition in general, but, in practical terms, it needs to be implemented in relation to chunks of meaning --words, expressions, or passages.

Establishing a principle of action in regards to second language acquisition is, yet, only the beginning. Its application to the different endeavors of second language teaching is what gives pedagogical validation to that principle. The following are

some **applications** of the Comprehension principle:

Application 1: Teaching

Successful language teaching (especially in the beginning stages) with a goal of the learning the language with the purpose of using in "real-life" communication, seems to reveal a heavy reliance on teacher involvement; on use of realia and props; on the organization of hands-on experiences; on the design and use of pictorial aids that can help explain what the teacher means and that assist the teacher in applying what has been the object of the lesson. Foreign and, in general, second language teachers are famous everywhere for being the monopolizers of basic materials with which to produce puppets, two-dimensional figures, drawings of all sorts, realia of all kinds... To the unaware observer, they "play and clown around", they move, they never seem to finish what they started...

Little by little, as schemata begin to form and listening has already prepared the student to begin using those new sounds and their combinations with an intended meaning, more abstraction can be created and the student begins to use contextual clues more directly related to the written representation of the words of the new language. At that point, there appears a *new balance* between learning strictly from what he experiences around him (teacher acting, pictorial and three-dimensional representations, etc.) associated with the way it is referred to by the instructor, and learning from the written language. Some form of this new balance will probably be always present, with more and more of the language itself serving as the learning tool

for new language elements. Teaching must reflect the development and the changes of this balance. The pedagogy of second language acquisition must evolve toward an increasing reliance on the language itself as a vehicle of meaning, but this change must be very gradual and according to the comprehension capabilities of the learner.

In keeping with the Comprehension principles, one of the ways in which meaning can be most easily conveyed to the student is through the use of pictorial images --drawings, props, flash cards, or screens. The organization of those images according to specific rules of manipulation of the new language can be though of as a "method" of teaching the language. Figures are easily understood and their association with words and expressions of the new language seems to work "like magic". The following is a demonstration of this argument. [...]

In checking for comprehension in a teaching situation, or for evaluation of language acquisition, testing for comprehension oftentimes requires the use of paper or electronic means. One of the most important considerations in teaching and testing is the making or the selection of materials. Whether books, workbooks, reading materials, exercises, or anything else, every material made or selected by the instructor must respond to the basic requirement of the Comprehension Approach, that is, it must allow the learner to derive meaning without violating other principles of language acquisition or of sound pedagogy. The material must --as closely as possible-- convey meaning in a clear, unequivocal way. In the initial stages of language acquisition that is almost solely possible through materials and procedures

that either appeal to the learner's own involvement in "acting out" a response, or to his understanding of meaning through the language of imagery, or to both.

In later stages, as the second language becomes cemented, involvement of the left hemisphere in the negotiation of meaning for either teaching or testing can take different forms. For instance, it can appeal to context through the use of "cloze" exercises; or, it can make use of reading procedures to derive meaning from the judicious use of cognates. Other input can take place in a very practical way by use of materials that present language in a graded sequence, that take advantage of the learner's previous learnings, and/or that couple specific oral and visual clues for meaning.

In terms of *testing* --either to check for comprehension in the course of a lesson, or to check for retention at a later time-- there are several ways in which comprehension can be demonstrated without using regular speech. They are generally considered appropriate for early language acquisition stages. Some of these procedures are:

01. Action Demonstrations

They include the actual "bodily" doing of something to indicate that comprehension has taken place. In recent years, this type of demonstration has been given added meaning by using *action verbs* , or verbs that require for the *student to perform something to indicate understanding* This procedure --considered by many an "approach"-- has been called *Total Physical Response (TPR)* .

Other types of bodily responses used to indicate comprehension can include:

a. Pointing
b. Showing
c. Assenting/dissenting
d. Moving limb
e. Smiling
f. Laughing
g. Winking
h. Clapping
i. Nodding
j. Waving hand
k. Turning head
l. Holding up something

02. "Paper-and-pencil" demonstrations

These include various ways in which comprehension can be demonstrated by performing an action that does not involve the body per se. For instance:

a. Coloring
b. Placing a letter
c. Placing a number
d. Rearranging
e. Matching
f. Connecting
g. Placing inside a circle, quadrangle; inside a house, a room; etc.
h. Drawing a circle, a quadrangle, etc. around
i. Crossing out
j. Checking
k. Underligning
l. Erasing
m. Capitalizing
n. Moving (to right, to left, up, down, to center, to side, behind, in front, above, below)
o. Drawing

03. Limited-speech demonstrations.

a. Two-word-continuum answers (opposites/complementary) such as:

1- Yes/no
2- Here/there
3- Now/then
4- Large/small
5- Black/white; red/blue...
6- Long/short
7- Large/small
8- Fat/thin

b. One-word open answers

Teaching/testing (involving either speaking, reading, or writing) when acquisition of particular lexical and syntactical items is beyond the stage of listening and comprehension, may involve procedures such as:

01. Introduction of the written representation of words through props, cards, posters, etc.

02. Firming-up of basic structures through writing exercises

03. Conversation-building

a. Teacher-student
b. Student-teacher
c. Student-student

04. Simple story production by way of --for instance:

a. Re-telling of stories with own words
b. Use of pre-prepared story figures
c. Drawing of story scenes
d. Drama representation

05. Use of pre-prepared descriptions and/or stories according to semantic fields

When the student is beyond the earlier stages of acquisition, larger chunks of linguistic material can be handled at any point in time. They may involve a certain amount of new materials as well as a recombination of previously acquired ones. Some procedures that may be used are:

01. Conversation around well defined topics

02. Open conversation

03. Reading of teacher-prepared texts

04. Use of *authentic* materials:

a. T.V. broadcasts
b. Movies
c. Radio broadcasts (under specific conditions)
d. Periodicals

05. Use of literature

Application 2: Teacher Training and Supervision

While there is certainly no universal formula for the training and supervision of second language teachers, acceptance and application of the principles of second language acquisition as presented by the Comprehension Approach can provide a firm basis for a clear-cut direction in that endeavor. With that purpose, I would like to offer the following considerations:

01. Take negotiation of meaning as a central point for training and supervision.

No other point seems of such importance, particularly if we are addressing teachers with experience, as in the case of training native teachers for immersion. An entire training program can be built around negotiation of meaning

02. Provide short basic principles of language acquisition that can orient the overall task of language teaching

03. Do specific practice on the methodology of language teaching, whether in a target language or an immersion context

04. Avoid the principle of action that seems to say that speaking the language is the only condition to become a good second language teacher

05. Take both the general skills of good teaching and the specific principles of second language acquisition as guidelines for teacher supervision, in agreement with the notion that at the base of good language teaching is just good teaching, at that at the base of good immersion teaching is good language teaching

SUMMARY

Language acquisition --in terms of methodology--is a function of meaning. The COMPREHENSION APPROACH seems to best serve this belief. A clear understanding and a proper application of this principle is the best guarantee of efficiency and joy in the teaching and the acquisition of a language. Specific procedures and materials, if they are well selected, well prepared, and well used, constitute an asset in language teaching and acquisition. Improper selection or application of teaching procedures may easily lead to frustration and discouragement on the part of both instructor and student. The ability to select, prepare, and use appropriate language teaching procedures CAN and MUST be learned. Intuition, in this regard, is not always our best ally, at least until we have a sufficiently firm theoretical and practical background. "Not everything works" must be remembered to do our job well as language instructors or supervisors. THANK YOU!